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ABSTRACT

The use of multicultural literature in school reading programs can enhance the regular reading program by providing students with an awareness for other cultures, and by making a contribution to overall competence in all areas of language arts and in reading comprehension. When schools use literature that reflects only mainstream majority values, students are exposed to a narrow linguistic, historical, and cultural picture. An introduction to differing cultural viewpoints in literature can serve as a starting point for young readers to become more enlightened, providing an awareness of other cultures and a consciousness of oneself and one's relationship to a new culture. By integrating multiethnic literature into a school reading program, children realize that all ethnic groups have roots in the past and a strong heritage that is part of their culture. The stories should be carefully chosen and reflect accurate information, since more harm than good is done through literature which idealizes or glorifies a mythical past, or through tales which perpetuate negative stereotypes. The ultimate goals for the incorporation of multiethnic literature into reading programs are to help youngsters see similarities as well as differences between cultures, to appreciate the contributions of all people, and to lessen the anxieties and prejudices toward those who are different. Appendices include instructional strategies for multiethnic literature, examples of vocabulary webs, and a bibliography of ethnic literature. (NKA)

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BRIDGING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THROUGH READING: MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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BRIDGING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THROUGH READING: MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

The teaching of reading appears high on the list of teaching priorities today as it always has in public education. Classes in reading, remedial reading, compensatory education, and extensive language programs exist throughout the country to meet the literacy needs of students today. Many of these programs utilize innovative techniques to teach students with diverse literacy needs. The purpose of this paper is to suggest instructional strategies that could be used to teach reading effectively through the medium of multiethnic literature.

The use of multiethnic literature in school reading programs can enhance the regular reading program by providing students with an awareness for other cultures, and by making a contribution to overall competence in all four areas of language arts, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The reader can develop a variety of literacy skills by extracting meaning from literature that is meaningful and relevant to real-life situations. Utilizing literary writings helps students focus on imagery and emotional reactions from a personal point of view and teaches them to compare their own values, beliefs, and customs with those of others.

Another area crucial to the reading process is the area of comprehension. Teachers can use various questioning strategies to develop higher cognitive skills in the area of comprehension. Students can learn specific comprehension skills by analyzing and responding to literary works, by making judgments about the content of literature, and by comparing content with their own personal experiences. The use of literature can provide students with vicarious experiences especially multicultural ones.

Why Use Multiethnic Literature in the Classroom

Through literature one discovers the intricacies of a language, as well as the history and the culture of a people. In addition, when children read literature they encounter a multitude of characters who are both similar to and different from the reader (Norton, 1983). Each character of a story is driven by certain emotions and has to deal with the problems and joys of life in various ways. How the heroes and heroines react and cope provides the child with insights and information well beyond the reader's own personal experiences.

Too often, however, schools utilize a select literature, primarily British and American, which tends to reflect mainstream majority values. When this happens, students are exposed to a narrow linguistic, historical, and cultural picture. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (1977, p. 25) laments this situation noting that "white children, too, deserve more than most books now provide. Growing up in a monocultural environment deprives white children of a broad, rich education. To limit white children's experiences to Euro-American language, musical and literature tradition, visual arts, and historical perspective, is to rob them of the enrichment and sophistication which comprises good education."

In addition, Irving (1984) points out that only when one experiences culture shock through interaction with or exposure to another culture does one truly begin to examine and understand the influence of one's own culture. An introduction to differing cultural viewpoints in literature can serve as a starting point for young readers to become more enlightened. The use of multiethnic literature can enhance a reading program for students, providing an awareness of other cultures and a consciousness of oneself and one's relationship to a new culture.

The mainstream child is not the only one to lose in a narrowly focused reading program. Emphasis on the majority culture sends a potentially damaging nonverbal message to all children; namely that other cultures and their accomplishments are somehow not worthwhile. This is a particularly tragic circumstance since our classrooms increasingly reflect the culturally pluralistic nature of our nation and our world. Within the schools one finds children from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and these children as well as mainstream Anglo children can benefit by an exploration of the literary traditions and experiences of other peoples. De Costa (1984) describes the positive experience of a migrant worker's child who in his elementary classroom is guided to a real understanding of the extent of his travels and experiences. In this way, literature, about the migrant experience can expand both the child involved in that life as well as his classmates. As Stott (1983, p. 437) urges, "if we wish children to become sensitive to other cultures, one of the best ways to do so is to let them read or hear the stories children of these cultures would have been familiar with."

By integrating multiethnic literature into a school reading program, children realize that all ethnic groups have roots in the past and a strong heritage that is part of their culture. Students can discover by reading about others their contributions, the differences and similarities among people, and most of all, the respect and emotional ties present within cultures. Through reading and studying about others students become aware of how people think and behave. For example, literature develops a strong traditional value system for a culture. By reading students learn about diversity in these value systems such as respect for personal and property rights of others, common courtesy, citizenship responsibilities, intrafamilial duties, and appropriate regard for authority. Students

encountering multiethnic literature in their reading curriculum benefit academically and also learn the social values and behaviors of people in society.

Yet as important as inclusion of multiethnic literature can be to a program, often teachers in our public schools are not prepared to teach reading through the use of such literature. Teachers may have a narrow perspective of other cultures. Zintz (1980, p. 368-369) states, "too many teachers are inadequately prepared to understand, accept, or to teach these dissimilar cultural values. Teachers come from homes where the drive for success and achievement has been internalized early, where 'work for work's sake' is rewarded, and where time and energy are spent building for the future. Many children come to the classroom with a set of values and background experiences radically different from that of the average American child. To teach children successfully, the teacher must be cognizant of these differences and must above all seek to understand without disparagement those ideas, values, and practices different from his/her own." Adequate preparation of teachers is an important component of any reading program, and knowledge of how to use multiethnic literature requires preparation and training. Prepared teachers can provide a strong sense of understanding and an acceptance of other cultures.

One element of teacher training is the proper judgment needed for choosing appropriate literature. Often in the haste to provide culturally enriching experiences for students, some of the multiethnic literature utilized in the classroom has not been carefully monitored. It is crucial that the stories present accurate and realistic information. More harm than good is done through literature which idealizes or glorifies a mythical past, or through tales which perpetuate negative stereotypes. In addition, teachers should consider the level with which they are working.

Very young students may only be confused by literature depicting profoundly different cultural groups (Stott, 1983). Yet small children still need to be exposed to the cultural diversity in our world. By the fourth grade as Stott (1983) cites, students can begin to handle dramatically different cultures, and further they can compare and contrast cultural groups.

The ultimate goals then for the incorporation of multiethnic literature into reading programs are to help the youngster see similarities as well as the differences between cultures, to appreciate the contributions of all people, and to lessen the anxieties and prejudices toward those who are different. Indeed various research studies (Norton, 1983 and MacCann & Woodard, 1977) have documented the positive effects of using multiethnic literature to expand student awareness and to help decrease negative stereotyping of the culturally different. However, simply including multiethnic literature in the curriculum is not enough. It is essential to discuss each story and the underlying cultural values to prevent misconceptions and to build schema for children to more efficiently process other related literature in the future.

Thus, through the use of multiethnic literature, teachers can communicate a powerful message to their students; they can signal an open and accepting attitude toward differences. Through reading and discussing literature concerning diverse cultural groups, students can hopefully move toward the realization that "no one culture is inherently better or worse than another. All cultural systems are equally valid as variations on the human experience" (Irving, 1984).

Classroom Applications of Multiethnic Literature

Multiethnic literature can easily be integrated into existing language and literature programs through the use of supplemental materials in the classroom or from the library. Teachers can share stories both orally and in written form with their students, and activities with these multiethnic

stories can parallel the typical language arts exercises such as vocabulary, comprehension, writing, literal and figurative language development, and values education. The following are some ideas for blending multiethnic literature into the classroom.

As with all reading material utilized in the classroom, careful attention should be paid to vocabulary especially colloquial or foreign expressions, slang and jargon. Teachers need to spot potential problem areas for students. With multiethnic literature as well as other readings, students should be exposed to a variety of pre-reading activities in order to expand lexical and conceptual knowledge. Class discussion, role play, and brainstorming are all activities in which students can participate and increase their background knowledge or schema prior to encountering the actual text. Vocabulary webs (Appendix B) provide another rich source of language development. "The creation of a web is a way for teachers to organize ideas around a theme or topic" (Fox & Allen, 1983 p. 7). Setting the stage through visuals is also a useful pre-reading exercise. Teachers can utilize maps and diagrams of areas to provide geographical and spatial orientation. In fact, teachers can tap into the multicultural nature of their own classroom by having a world map and noting each student's birthplace and other areas where they have lived. Migrant students, second language learners, and others have the opportunity to become "experts" for the class on certain areas as these crop up in the literature. Multiethnic literature then can provide an interdisciplinary focus linking social studies and language arts. In addition, students can gain an appreciation for the rich diversity of fellow classmates.

Discussion prior to actual reading of any material is important; with multiethnic literature it is essential as the reader will meet with diverse values and viewpoints, and preparation beforehand enables the student to

more successfully bridge the gap between their own personal values and culture and those represented in the story. Thus, through multiethnic literature the child is encouraged to grow cognitively in regard to language development as well as to grow socially and emotionally.

Post reading activities can take a vast array of shapes and directions. The teacher or students might develop a story's content into a reader's theater and then assign parts for students to act out in class. In fact, drama in general serves as a rich source of literature, and students are often more motivated by this genre because they can become actively involved in content. Furthermore, simple lesson plans (Appendix A) can also be developed which tap into basic skills such as vocabulary development, comprehension, figurative language use, etc.

The oral and folk tradition of a culture also provide an abundant source of multiethnic literature for the reading classroom and can be developed into a cooperative project for the entire class. After exposure to various types of folklore in written and oral form, students can begin to collect their own personal experience narratives or folktales from family, friends, and classmates. A specific topic may be focused on such as ghost stories, folk medicine, jokes, or customs. These can then be edited in groups and compiled into volumes for the teacher to publish for class use. In this manner, oral language development is linked to reading and writing.

As students are exposed to increasing amounts of multiethnic literature within the context of the existing reading program, they can begin to analyze the different linguistic and cultural components present in various stories. Teachers and students can build webs or organize charts on individual stories noting the values expressed, style of the author, and specific language usage in that culture. Eventually students can build up to an integration of the multiethnic literature encountered

thus far, and they can compare and contrast all the cultures, customs, values, attitudes, and linguistic devices used.

Finally, the values woven into literary selections are both explicitly and implicitly stated, and through an examination of multiethnic literature students become aware of values and concerns other than their own. Values clarification exercises can help students increase this sensitivity. Additionally, students can expand critical reading and inferential skills as they try to piece together a picture of the value structure of a culture through the actions of characters in the story. Once students have encountered selections from various cultural groups, the teacher might organize an activity where students respond to a value laden question or event as the characters in different stories would. The same event might be utilized after each story to help students compare and contrast the values and attitudes of each new group encountered through literature.

In conclusion, multiethnic literature serves a useful purpose in the reading program. Students can continue to build essential skills needed to become competent readers, and in addition, they can expand their social and emotional awareness by exposure to new and different styles of living and thinking.

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Appendix A

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE

Title: "Bums in the Attic" from The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

Summary: Esperanza is a young Hispanic girl. Her father works as a gardener for very rich people. She is ashamed of her family's poverty and dreams of having her own house one day where she will let anyone come and stay.

Grade Level: Adaptable

Vocabulary:

lottery-a drawing for prizes
garbage-trash, unwanted material
bums-a tramp, persons without a job who wander from place to place
attic-the space or room below the roof of a house
floorboards-a board in the floor

Language Development:

A. Figurative Language
   1. Similes use like or as to make a comparison
      "staring out the window like the hungry"
   2. Symbolism-using concrete or familiar objects and images to represet abstract or unfamiliar ideas
      "People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of use who live too much on earth."

B. Idioms
   1. "stuck up"

Comprehension

A. Literal
   1. What kind of job does Esperanza's father have?
   2. Why doesn't Esperanza want to go with the family on Sunday?
   3. Who will stay in the attic of Esperanza's house one day?

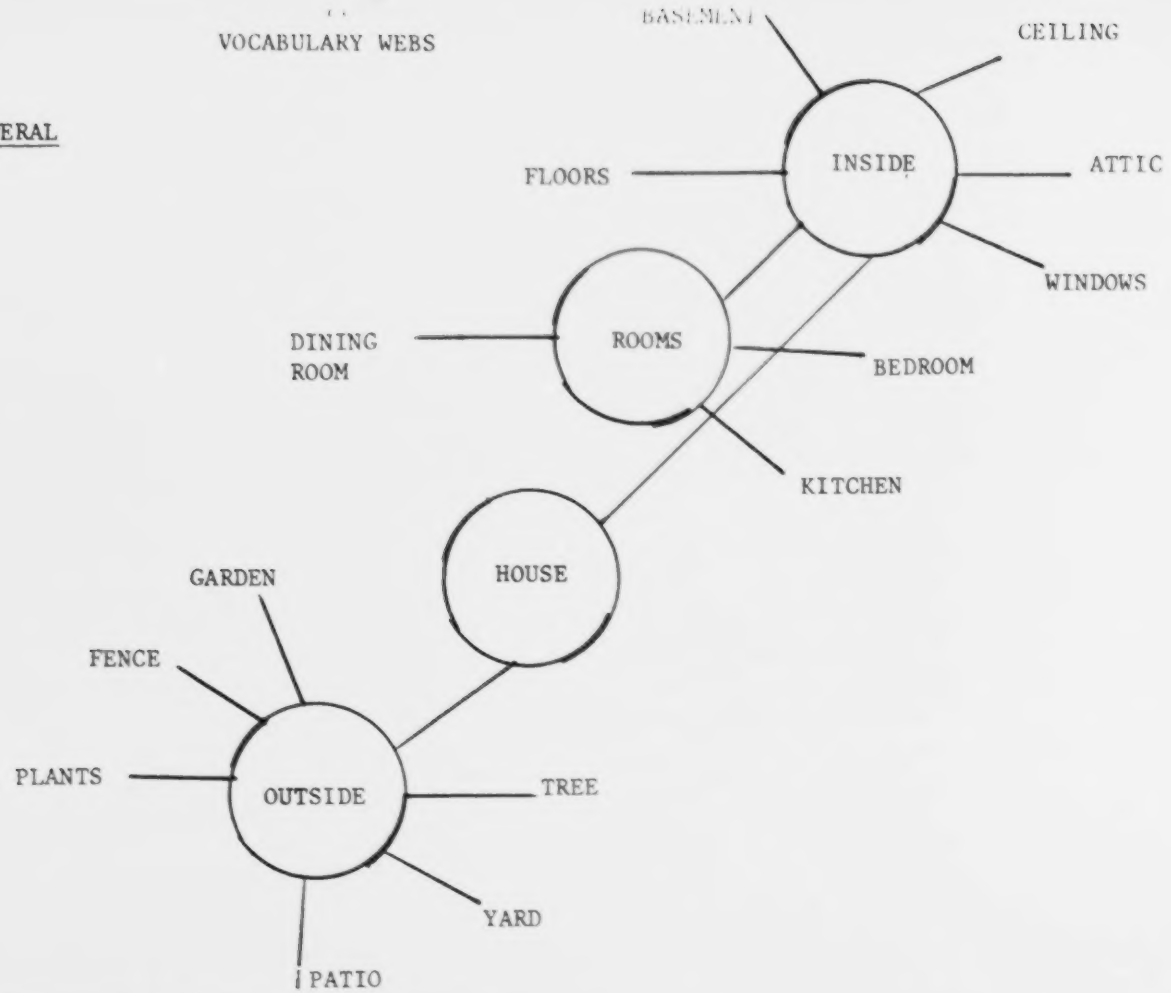
B. Interpretative
   1. Where do you think Esperanza's family lives?
   2. Do the rich people understand or care about Esperanza's life? Why or why not?
   3. Why will Esperanza let bums stay in the attic?
   4. What kind of house do you think Esperanza would like someday? Why?
   5. Why is Esperanza ashamed when the family goes out driving on Sunday?
   6. Do you think Esperanza will get her own house someday?

Writing Activities:

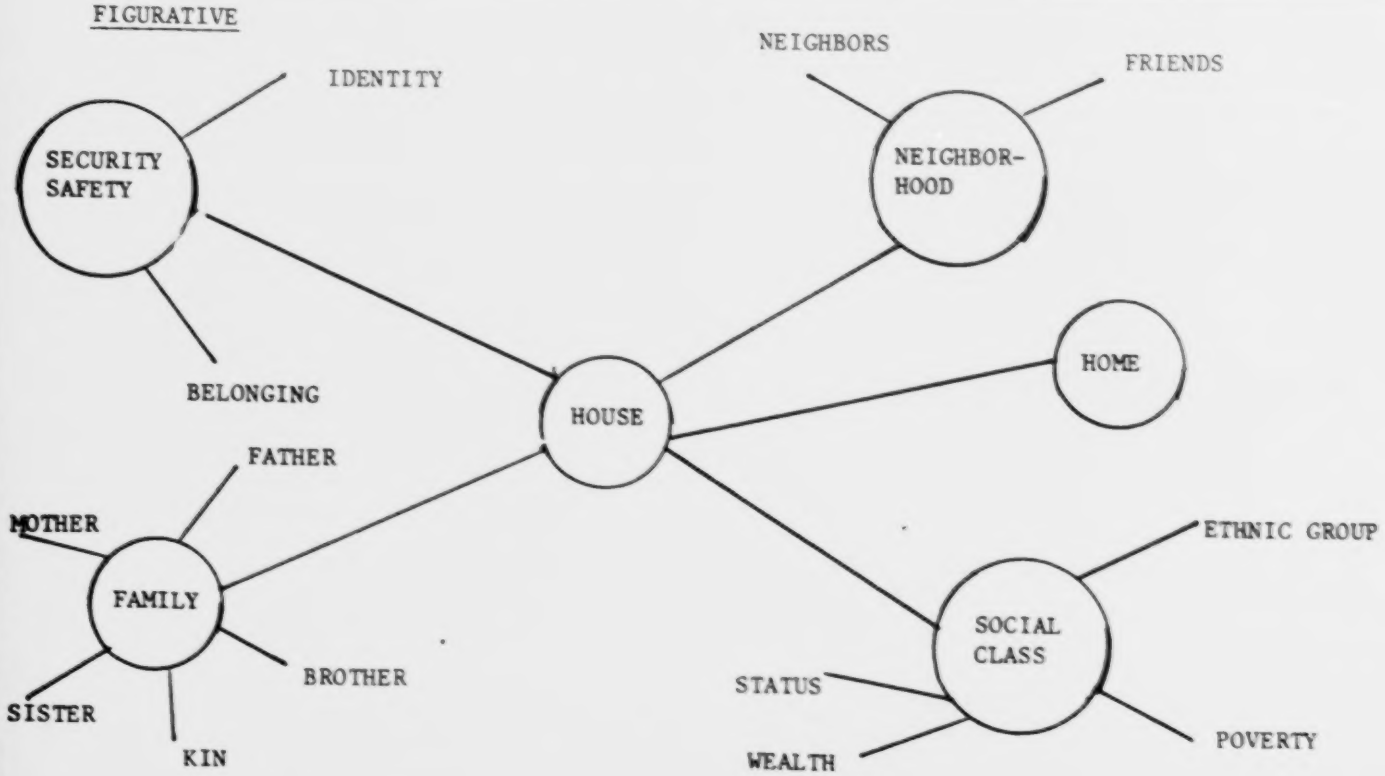
1. Draw a picture of the houses on the hill where Esperanza's father works and then describe this area.
2. Draw a picture of Esperanza's house and neighborhood and then describe this area.
3. Discuss how the house is a symbol in this story.

VOCABULARY WEBS

LITERAL



FIGURATIVE



Appendix C

ETHNIC LITERATURE

BLACK

Count on your Fingers African Style: Claudia Zaslavsky Crowell. Children will enjoy playing the game included in this view of how people who speak many languages can communicate through finger counting. All levels.

Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain: Verra Aardema. Dial. Illustrations depict the drought on the plain and the return of the wild creatures. 3-5.

Just Us Women: Jeanette Caines. Harper. Two women make plans for a trip South for a family visit. 2-3.

Children of the Sun: Jan Carew. Little Brown. The quest for values is the theme. Beautifully illustrated. 3-5.

Bo Rabbit Smart for True: Folktales from the Gullah: Priscilla Jaquith. Philomel. The language and tales of the Gullah, people brought as slaves to the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. 3-5.

Fish Fry: Susan Saunders. Viking. Watercolor illustrations portray life in rural East Texas in the early 1900's. 1-3.

Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum: Ashley Brian. Atheneum. African folktales portray human qualities. 3-5.

The Best Way Out: K. Follis Cheatham. Harcourt. After leaving his familiar home, things have gone badly for Haywood. Encouragement from his counselor helps. 5-8.

HISPANIC

A Coloring Book of Incas, Aztecs, Mayas. Bellerphon.

Lost City in the Clouds: The Discovery of Machu Picchu: Elizabeth Gemming. Coward. The story of the 1911 expedition and discovery of Machu Picchu.

Famous Mexican Americans: Clarke Newlor, Dood.

The Serpent and the Sun: Myths of the Mexican World: Cal Roy. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The Wonderful Chirrionera and Other Tales from Mexican Folklore: David Lindesy. Heidelberg.

Tortillas Para Mama and Other Spanish Rhymes: Margot C. Griego. Holt. Nursery rhymes in English and Spanish. Useful in development of receptivity to language diversity.

NATIVE AMERICAN

Annie and the Old One: Neska Miles. Little, Brown. Co.

Moonsong Lullaby: Jamake Highwater, Lothrop. The role of the moon in Native American lore and culture is detailed. 3-5.

Moon Song: Byrd Baylor. Scribner. A lyrical legend in which the moon is mother to the coyotes. All levels.

Johnny Stands: Harry W. Paige. Warne. A 14-year-old Sioux boy learns to live in both Indian and Anglo worlds. Words and pronunciation in Lakota. 4-8.

ORIENTAL

A Boat to Nowhere: Maureen Crane Wartski. Westminister. The Vietnamese refugee crisis. 5-8.

The Five Sparrows: A Japanese Folktale: Patricia Montgomery Newton. Atheneum. A kind woman cares for an injured sparrow and is richly rewarded. 3-5.

Treasure Mountain: Folktales from Southern China: Cheng Mung Yun. Atheneum. Six folktales depicit greed, kindness, humor, and sharing 5-8.

Japanese Children's Favorite Stories: Florence Sakade. C. E. Tuttle.

Little One-Inch and Other Japanese Children's Favorite Stories. Asian Cultural Center, UNESCO. Charles Tuttle.

The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam: Huynh Quang Nhuong. Harper. Boyhood experiences, traditions, and beliefs. 4-8.

OTHER

Girls Can Be Anything They Want: Patricia Foote. Messner. Advice from fifteen women from diverse ethnic backgrounds. 3-5.

Two Pairs of Shoes: P.L. Travers. Viking, Middle Eastern fables deal with values and philosophies of contemporary significance. 3-5.

Nicole Visits an Amish Farm: Merle Good. Cultural differences between the Amish and dominant culture are pointed up in a two week visit. 2-5.